

iWay Newsletter

Perspectives on Interactive TV



Starz Entertainment: On Demand Made Simple

Rebecca Rusk Lim, Senior Director, Internet & Interactive TV, Starz Entertainment

You've just settled down to watch a commercial-free movie on cable, but it turns out the opening credits rolled 20 minutes ago. If only there was a way to get back to the starting point.

*Turns out there is. In an inventive application of cable's EBIF platform, Starz Entertainment has developed "Watch Now," a simple on-screen tool that whisks a viewer from a linear exhibition of a film to the On Demand version that's stored and ready for viewing anytime. The application, which drew acclaim at the 2009 Cable Show in Washington D.C., reflects the work of a team led by **Rebecca Rusk Lim**, Starz Entertainment Senior Director, Internet & Interactive TV. A well-known participant on the iTV scene, the former journalist (CNN and Asia Business News) has worked for more than 25 years developing innovative applications built on*

emerging technologies. Here, Rusk Lim talks about the possibilities (and limitations) of EBIF - and the importance of keeping things simple.

What are your key initiatives today (or recently) in the iTV space?

Interact Now is the umbrella name for three pieces within our interactive TV initiative - Watch Now, Buy Now and Now Showing. Watch Now is really the link from linear to non-linear. We're a premium channel, so we thought it was smart to add value for the subscribers that we already have. There's a lot of the industry that's focused on interactive advertising - and we're all for that, and for Canoe pushing the EBIF standard out to the industry - but we're not an ad-supported channel. And we feel that if

From the Editor

More people would use On Demand TV, according to a prevalent industry theory, if it didn't take so many clicks of the remote to get there. The thinking is that multi-layered menus and static, textual descriptions of programs don't exactly ooze ease-of-use.

The premium channel provider Starz Entertainment, though, thinks it has a better way. In this edition of iWay, Starz Senior Director of Internet and Interactive TV, Rebecca Rusk Lim, describes a nifty EBIF application that gets around many of the entry problems tied to On Demand - and makes it easy to get to movies with just a click or two. Read on to find out more.

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everything that comes up is an ad, it's going to turn people off. So we wanted to have our first interactive application really enhance the viewing. It's an ease of use mechanism.

What does it do?

Basically if you're watching Starz and you come into the movie that started, let's say, seven minutes ago, you'll get an interactive overlay that allows you to either start it again, or, if you have an HD box, watch it in HD, or go to the "All Movies" menu within VOD. Or go to "Up Next," which gives you some other viewing options.

It sort of bypasses the traditional VOD menu and clicking structure, then?

Yes. We see that there's a percentage of our audience that never uses On Demand, and we wonder why. It may be because they think everything in the On Demand category costs money, because when you go there the first things you see are usually movies that are pay-per-view VOD, so they think the whole category is paid, and they just turn off. Or, to accomplish that same action of selecting an On Demand movie takes about seven clicks with some interactive guides. So what we thought is: Let's just give customers an easy way to jump between linear and linear, and also offer up, if they have an HD box, to go right over to the HD version of the movie. So it gives them more functionality over their content, too, because they can fast-forward, pause or rewind. It's very simple, it's easy to use, and it makes sense to enhance the

viewing experience.

Is this application deployed?

Right now we have it up on a satellite transponder, and we have several companies downloading it. We are working toward a trial this fall with an MSO.

Your product portfolio involves bound and unbound applications, then.

"Buy Now" is an upsell application. It's a destination-based or virtual channel. In EBIF language, "Watch Now" is a bound app, and "Buy



Now" and "Now Showing" are unbound apps.

How do I get to the 'Buy Now' application as a subscriber?

There are several ways that you can access it. We can embed a trigger across a cross-channel commercial. So we'd play a spot where we'd promote it. Or in some markets, we might put up an overlay that would take you straight into that virtual channel. Also, people can find it at a destination - tune to channel 685, for instance. Ideally, in those kinds of situations we'd like to be able to authenticate whether somebody is a subscriber or not. If they're not, then they get an upsell message. If they are a subscriber, then they'd

get a tune-in message.

The idea is that you're using a video experience to sell premium television?

It's trying to leverage an impulse upgrade. And again, this is one of the things about being early to market. As itaas knows very well, there are a lot of different back ends and proprietary systems that EBIF has to hand off to. And that's one of the things we're trying to work on with various people in the industry.

What has been your experience in authoring for the EBIF platform?

The tool we used is the TV works tool. And we've evaluated some of the other tools, as well. The good and the bad of EBIF are: It's great because it hits legacy boxes, and it's tough to develop for because it hits legacy boxes. For example, for graphics you can use 16 colors, but really 14 colors, because you can't use the pure white or pure black. That compares to at least 256 in other mediums, and in web and Flash it's unlimited. So we need to keep that palette consistent for the lower end boxes. In the higher-end boxes we can use 8-bit graphics, so they look great. We built our app so that it actually deploys with both 4-bit and 8-bit graphics. Once it hits a set-top box, the user agent in the set-top box tells us which one it is, and it knows what to display.

What other limitations do you have to bear in mind?

Another thing I think is really

important: a 100k app is about all the low-end boxes can take. Ours is actually lower than that, but it's tough. You have to make design decisions constantly. That's why we made a simple app that does one or two things well. "Watch Now" either gets you from linear to non-linear, or it offers some other viewing choices. You've got to know what you want to do and make it simple, and not try to over-build the app.

You've made a point of displaying movie images supplied by your studios, too.

That's how movies are known and promoted. We think those images sell way better than text is ever going to sell. The key art is what the studios put the money into. The fact that we can put it up on the screen creates a visual connection that we think is very strong.

How many linear movies will be enhanced with the Watch Now functionality?

For this trial, we're working with our programming group to come up with top titles that we're enhancing. It's an editorial choice based in part on high box office performance and the greatest recency. And then on top of that, we'll have a "Top Titles" button where we editorially drop in three other titles that are suggested. That will play on the lower end boxes where the "Watch in HD" button won't be there. So we'll offer the title that's playing, plus a few suggestions. I don't think it needs to be pervasive or 24/7 at this point, because we're testing, and we want to monitor bandwidth usage, VOD connect rates and other metrics.

Are you developing now for the tru2way platform?

We're looking at it; but for the immediate future, to actually deploy applications, EBIF is going to get there first. That's partly because of the support for Canoe, and also because of the universe of embedded set top boxes. So for us, we feel that's the platform to develop for now.

What advice would you share with application developers who plan to work within the EBIF

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environment?

They need to stay really true to the spec. There's been some good work done by CableLabs and some really good information on how to build an app. You can find it on the CableLabs website. So I'd start there. The other big thing is how to get your app tested and verified. There's a lot of work going on the industry towards that. But there is no sort of central clearinghouse. For us, we participate in the CableLabs interoperability events, and are working on a field trial with an MSO. But we also have an in-house testing environment where, because we have a cable headend here and a VOD server, and

because we control our transmission, we can see exactly how it looks and performs.

How would you characterize the state of EBIF deployment in the cable industry?

I think that this year has been more of a year for the MSOs to really get their plumbing in place. The user agents are in the boxes and being tested, and a lot of operators have converted their guides to tru2way or are in the process of it. It seems like they're putting the infrastructure in place for next year to really start to onboard some of these applications.

Where do you think EBIF ultimately fits within the consumer-facing environment?

For us, it's a new medium. I don't think of this as a technology play. This is really a marketing play. It lets us use our air to give people an easier way to use Starz content. The VOD platform is something that cable can do really well, and something that can be leveraged in different ways. In fact, when we started developing apps, I asked our sales group, "What would help the product?" Well, they said it would help to be able to more easily navigate to VOD movies.



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